

Theological Education and Contemporary Challenges

By Dr. George Sabra



Dr. Sabra is the president of the Near East School of Theology (NEST), in Beirut, Lebanon. This article was given as a speech at the graduation ceremony of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC) on May 31, 2019.

t the outset I want to express my gratitude to ETSC, especially its president, my dear friend and colleague the Reverend Dr. Atef Mehanny, for giving me the honor of being the speaker at this commencement ceremony. Permit me now to convey to you the greetings of the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut, its board, faculty, and students. Our two institutions have a long history of cooperation and communication that began almost half a century ago and continues until now. I also want to express heartfelt congratulations on behalf of NEST, and in my own name, to the graduates for their great achievement in earning the degrees they deserve after years of study and hard work.

The title of my talk is "Theological Education and Contemporary Challenges." It is definitely assumed that we address this subject in the light of our existence and work in the Middle East. But this does not imply that some of the challenges that I will mention and tackle are not also faced by theological education wherever it exists, though in different ways.

I see five challenges to theological education at this time in our Middle Eastern and Arab world.

1.I will begin with the challenge presented in the area of means and tools before I tackle challenges more related to method and content, namely the huge technological advances in the world. Theological education in our region has to develop technically in order to keep pace with the rapid advancement in techniques for collecting, preserving, and benefiting from information. We live in an electronic and digital world. The computer has replaced the pen and paper; the screen has replaced the black board; and digital books and magazines are available to us by thousands and tens of thousands—in fact, full libraries are digitized and stored in small devices. The ease and speed of getting information, books, and magazines is amazing. Communication and the sharing of information between institutions and individuals is boundless. Distance learning and learning through electronic communication has changed the traditional form of education based on geographical and physical existence in one place and one room. And the list goes on. The world is in the midst of a real revolution in the area of information technology.

Theological education cannot avoid the massive progress and change in the field of technology, and it should adapt and adjust to it and benefit from it as much as possible. This is a great challenge facing theological education in the twenty-first century, not only in the Middle East but in the world at large. But we have to be aware

E#5C *CJT* 7 (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

that this challenge—that is, keeping pace with progress and change in the area of information technology—involves a hazard of another sort that is equally important: this is the tendency to become impressed and obsessed by large numbers, speed, technology, images, and information—and drowning in them. The danger in today's education, and not only in theological education, is becoming unduly impressed by and concerned with electronic means as if they were the ends. Alister McGrath, a contemporary theologian, says, "We feel engulfed by a tsunami of facts, in which we can find no meaning." In the midst of the tremendous advancement in information technology, we have to remember and realize, especially in theology, that information, however abundant and varied, is not an alternative to meaning; that knowledge, however broad, is not wisdom; and that all technological advancements and changes in techniques do not really or actually affect how we think of ourselves, how we perceive ourselves, and how we relate to others and God. These fundamental matters, which have been faced by thinkers and theologians before us, have not altered with the change and development of new technologies. All of us in the field of theological education, in the face of these fundamental matters, still encounter the same questions: "How do we read a text, think critically, write thoughtfully."²

2. The second challenge is both old and new—that is, how are we to develop a theological education that combines prayer, intellect, and praxis? What I mean by prayer is what we call the spiritual formation of the student of theology. An Eastern patristic writer, Evagrius Pontus, defines a theologian in this way: "A theologian is someone who prays." Studying theology is basically unlike any other study because it assumes and necessarily involves a personal relationship between the student and the subject of study, between the knowledge seeker and the subject of knowledge—that is, between the student and God, the subject of theology. The subject of the study of theology is God and all that is related to God.

At the same time, the subject of our study is also the object of our love and worship. The subject of the study of theology is a being whom we are interacting with and relating to through prayer, love, and faith. For example, can you imagine physics students—those who study the physical universe of matter, energy, atoms, neutrons, and electrons—allocating time in their weekly or daily programs to gathering with others to worship and pray to matter? Or law students, who are studying legal codes, ending or beginning their day by singing to law? Or medical students meeting regularly to praise the human body for its immune system's ability to overcome diseases? Theology students are the only students who necessarily relate to their subject of study with a personal relationship because their subject of study is not just a subject but also a living being who cannot be truly known without our interaction with him through love, worship, and obedience.

Consistent with this understanding, the Evangelical heritage, rather the Christian heritage, does not lack the element of prayer in the area of theological studies. But the challenge here is dual: combining prayer with thought, on the one side, and praxis, on the other. Our Evangelical churches in the Middle East are the fruit of the

¹ See A. McGrath, Surprised by Meaning. Science, Faith and How We Make Sense of Things. (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 3.

²See Brayton Polka, Podcast Interview. Published October 26, 2015. Face2Face. Davidpecklive.com.

³ A desert father from the fourth century.

E#5C *CJT* 7 (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

activity of missionary movements, and it is well known that missionary movements do not give priority to study, theory, and intellectual and doctrinal matters in their activities. Instead, they concentrate mainly on the experience of personal conversion and spiritual renewal while being faithful to a Bible-based spirituality. However, authentic Evangelical spirituality and identity are not limited to a conversion experience or personal piety; it produced and is still producing profound and wide-ranging theological thought, which has addressed faith-questions and also dialogued with philosophy and the human, social and natural sciences.

Theological education should not neglect the academic and intellectual tasks that it practiced in the past and still practices. Our commitment to the subject of our study in love and prayer does not mean that we can allow ourselves to be slack in our seriousness, keenness, and scholarly professionalism. We should be no less critical than any other researcher or knowledge seeker in any of the other academic disciplines. We aspire for a theological education that is not afraid to confront perplexing and dangerous questions and that does not isolate itself in order to evade dialogue with the latest developments in educational, historical, and social theories or ideas. At the same time, theological education should not be relegated only to prayer and knowledge; it should be committed to praxis, i.e., it should be socially responsible.

We, the Evangelical people in this Middle East, as I mentioned above, are a product of a western missionary movement that came to this area in the nineteenth century. It was the aim of that movement to foster spiritual renewal through calling for repentance and spiritual rebirth. The missionaries focused on changing individuals by helping them to develop a heart-based piety; the main thing was the act of a living personal faith that expressed itself in bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. What mattered was rebirth, renewal, and conversion of personal lives through committing their wills and hearts to the Lord Jesus.

While proclaiming that the message of salvation was primary, involvement in social work through educational and medical ministries was justified as a means of evangelizing people who could not be reached through worship services or Bible studies. The salvation of souls was the only measure of success. In the logic of subjective Evangelical piety, there was a clear distinction between spiritual and secular matters. Believers were to seek to be good citizens and submit to proper authority because "it has been established by God" and because "whoever rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted" (Romans 13: 1-2). Yet, the believer was not concerned much with the secular world because heaven is his homeland and eternal life his goal.

These were the basic ideas that our traditional Evangelical education was founded upon on in the Middle East, but we have come to realize that this conception of Evangelical faith and understanding of what it means to be Evangelical was not a sufficient and complete expression of authentic Evangelical identity. At its outset, the Evangelical Reformation was not limited to a narrow sense of personal piety. The gospel is not just the preaching of the forgiveness of sin and the liberation of people from guilt; rather, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ produced a life, ministry, death, and resurrection that resulted in the offer of salvation for all people as well as for the entire creation from all dimensions of bondage to sin and evil. Sin is not only personal corruption and the committing of individual sins, for sin is active and dominant in the general systems and structures of the world. The narrow definition of sin, which

E#5C *CJT* 7 (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

defines it as a private human act that is limited to individual human agents, is an incomplete definition for the grievous depth of sin. The Bible testifies to the power of sin and evil, as well as to their negative effects, which have authority over all aspects of life and affect every human being. There are sinful systems; sinful political, economic, and social human plans; and sinful politics. Our Christian faith calls us to oppose and fight them, but sometimes it also calls us to liberate them from sin. For example, any racist regime is not just a sinful and oppressive system because it is a work of individual human beings who have sinful hearts and who need conversion. Rather, the system itself is a sin! Sin is individual, communal, and social; consequently, liberation from sin has social as well as personal dimensions.

The kingdom of God that the Lord Jesus preached is not primarily for the afterlife; rather, it is the reign of God and his dynamic dominion, which extends over the whole creation. The kingdom of God, in confronting the corruption of sin that affects creation, means the regeneration of all and the transformation of history and creation to reveal the sovereign will of God. Perhaps the best expression for the project of the kingdom of God is the song of Mary, which describes the kingdom this way: "He is scattering those who are proud in their inmost thoughts"; he is bringing down "rulers from their thrones"; he is lifting up "the humble" (Luke 1:51-52). Jesus establishes the kingdom by proclaiming good news to the poor and downtrodden, binding up the brokenhearted, offering freedom to prisoners, and setting free the oppressed (Luke 4: 18). The kingdom of God is widely inclusive in that it encompasses both heaven and earth, for it is in harmony with the revelation of John, who said, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21: 1). Indeed, it is "a new earth," not just a new heaven.

The Church is not just a group of the elect or a collection of saved people, which keeps to itself and opposes the world with its temptations and sins. It is also the first fruits of the new humanity. God did not create human beings only to save a select group of people from among them; rather, God the savior came into the world in order to regenerate it and lead those he created to his desired end for the creation. The Church is the light of the world and the salt of earth. Light does not enlighten the world if it is put in a closed room, and salt does not flavor food if it stays in its box. For us to be a church and the body of Christ means that we have to give ourselves to the world as Jesus did by offering himself up for the sake of the world. In the same way, we have to be open to engagement with the world and with the issues of people in this world. To this end we have to be willing to go into the world and take risks in the confidence that God wants to regenerate the world through the agency of his church.

To act responsibly for God's ends, theological education must consciously seek to renew itself. In other words, it should renew itself on the basis that social responsibility is part and parcel of our faith identity. Therefore, it is not enough that theological education should include prayer and scholarship. It must also seek to be socially responsible. This is the great challenge that faces theological education. It must combine prayer, thought, and praxis, and this requires continually rethinking and re-evaluating our curriculums so that we do not inadvertently slip into extremism or give in to the tendency to emphasize one of these components at the expense of others.

3. The third challenge that confronts us as Evangelical theological seminaries in the Middle East is our involvement in the ecumenical movement, which is composed of those who are convinced of and committed to the legitimacy and necessity of mutual

E[‡]5C _{CJT} 7 (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

rapprochement, openness, and fellowship among the various churches and Christian traditions. After almost 1,500 years of church schisms and controversies, which began in the fifth century, a new era dawned in the twentieth century through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and this era culminated in the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Thus, the ecumenical movement was launched and gradually spread all over the world. Our Evangelical churches and seminaries in this region of the world have not only affiliated with that movement; they are actually its first founders in this region of the world. What does commitment to ecumenism entail in the field of theological education?

Genuine ecumenism is respect, openness, and acceptance of diversity and variety without undermining the integrity of our faith tradition. The difficulty we face in the Middle East is that, though committed to ecumenism, we must live, apply, and teach it in a very traditional and conservative society—that is, in a society whose general tendency is to reject those who are different. How can theological education be ecumenical in a diverse cultural context in which people tend to think monolithically? If ecumenical commitment has any meaning, it will include a confession of the fundamental truth of the legitimacy of other churches. Practically speaking, this means that churches should refrain from evangelizing Christians in other faith traditions and that we should stop defining ourselves against one another and so abandon an apologetic and polemical theological approach.

How do we teach Evangelical theology in the light of the recognition that other Christian traditions are legitimate and genuine expressions of the faith? After decades of the ecumenical movement, we still struggle with this question because not all people are ecumenical in the same way and to the same degree, and not all people understand the essence of ecumenism and accept it, though all churches at least pay lip-service to it.

Despite all of these difficulties and the ecumenical immaturity of some people, it is not possible or permissible to reverse course on the issues of openness and rapprochement between different churches and Christian traditions. Ongoing self-review, which should accompany the development of the curriculum in theological education, is inevitable. There have been important achievements as a result of local and global ecumenical dialogue and understanding. How can we infuse these achievements into the curriculum of theological education and its practice? How can we focus on the merits of others and the common ground that we share so that we are enriched by contact with others instead of feeling the need to raise contested points and focus on critique, criticism, and how we differ from one another? That is the ecumenical challenge ahead of us today.

4. The fourth challenge consists of developing a theological education that does not discriminate between men and women. Our Evangelical church played a pioneering role in the education of women in the Middle East. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first Evangelical missionaries and our national Evangelical fathers defied social habits and customs when they opened schools for girls' education. At that time, Arab and Middle Eastern society generally considered sending girls to school after the age of eight years to be shameful. When Evangelicals opened their schools for girls, many people from different religions and communities embraced this innovation, so that <u>not</u> sending girls to school became shameful. The Evangelical world was a pioneer in the education of women and in giving them positions in church and society.

E**‡**5C *CJT* 7 (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

This was not simply a matter of staying in step with the advance of social progress in human civilization. It also emerged out of the Evangelicals', nay the Christians', deep immersion in the knowledge of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the essential message of the apostles on this subject, which is summarized in Paul's words: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28).

How can we develop a theological education that responds to the work of the Holy Spirit in history, that Spirit of truth that the Lord Jesus promised us saying that, when he came, would guide us into all truth (John 16:13), in the matter of the ministry of women in the church and their equal role to men in society? That is the challenge ahead of us today in the Middle East.

In viewing the situation in our region, we see an escalation of religious extremism, rigid thinking, cultural reactionarism, social close-mindedness, terrorism, oppression, injustice, the trampling of human rights, and the stifling of freedom—especially the rights and liberties of women. Churches and institutions of theological education, in particular, should confront these conditions with the armor and ideals of God's word, teaching that women can serve the world every bit as well as men and that they can be an example to all in their cultural context.⁴

5. The fifth and the final challenge is to develop a theological education that overcomes our obsession with survival and self-preservation and moves on, in cooperation with our non-Christian partners, to an active witness in our homelands. The condition of Christians in Middle Eastern countries is, without doubt, disturbing and uncomfortable. Our numbers are constantly decreasing, immigration is worsening, anxiety about the future is intensifying, and there appears to be no positive change on the horizon. In such an atmosphere, worry about self-preservation—that is, maintaining our very existence—seems to overwhelm every other concern. We have become completely preoccupied with what I like to call "an obsession with survival." Perhaps this is natural for any human group that is bound by special ties. The survival instinct is one of the most basic of all human instincts. Christians, however, are not like any other human group for whom survival and physical continuity are supreme goals. We are the church of the God who so loved the world that he became incarnated in it and gave himself for it. Mere survival is not a Christian virtue, and preservation of existence is not the goal of the gospel. Being a church and being Christians mean that we are witnesses to the truth before God and for the sake of others, serving God and seeing the face of our Lord Jesus Christ in the faces of other people, not just in the faces of believers who happen to look like us. And we are to see him especially in the faces of the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Our obsession should be about giving a genuine testimony to our loving God and generous father, who gives life and does not take it away, conquers death and does not glorify it, and gives himself for the sake of others. Our obsession should not be about survival for the sake of survival, but survival for the sake of the pursuit of truth, love, righteousness, and cooperation with all people of good will (whether they are Christians or non-Christian), so that we may live together peacefully and in dignity. Our obsession should be about developing theological education that seeks truth, wherever it exists, and confesses it and rejoices in it, wherever it is achieved. The great theologian Thomas Aquinas stated an amazing

⁴George Sabra, "A Day that the Lord Has Made, " a sermon given at the ordination service for Najla Kassab as a minister, Rabiyeh Evangelical church, March 27, 2017, at 5:00 P.M.

E[‡]**5C** *CJT* **7** (2020) http://journal.etsc.org

and profound principle when he wrote, "Every truth—whoever may utter it—is from the Holy Spirit." And I would add this: Every truth—whoever does it—is from the Holy Spirit. Establishing our theological thought and our theological education on this principle would allow us to renew our views of other Christian communities, as well as other religions; and it would allow us to develop our views in openness, dialogue, and partnership with others. At the same time, we should also work to build a political and social life that is worthy of the human being as a human being, namely, as created by God and loved by Him.

In my view, these are among the most significant challenges that confront theological education in our time and in this region of the world.

Dear graduates, theological education is not behind you. We congratulate you on your great achievement, but we hope you are aware that the process of learning theology, which begins at home and continues in Sunday school and in the church, does not come to an end when one has earned a degree in theology. It lasts a lifetime. Today, your theological education has not come to an end; rather, you are simply turning a page. May our almighty God, who "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ," (2 Cor. 4:6) make you strong and shine his light into your hearts and minds as you confront all the difficult challenges ahead. Congratulations!

George Sabra President of NEST